MICHIGAN BRIDGET: Discovering The Truth Behind the Legend

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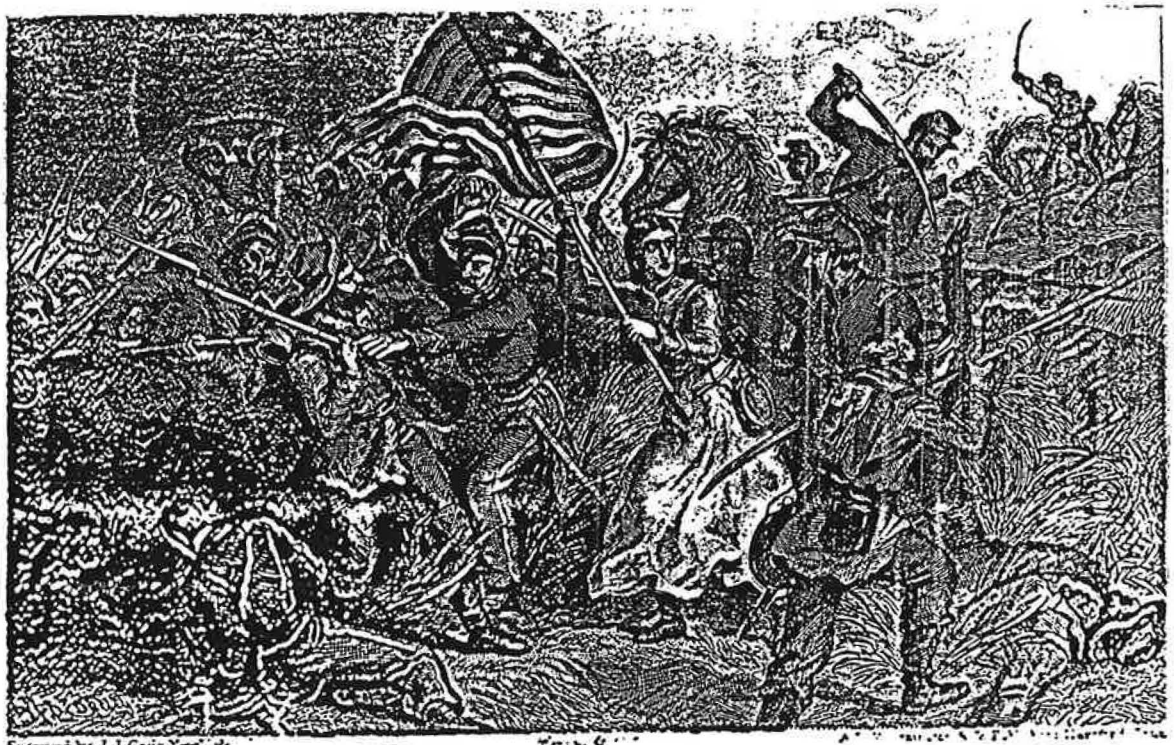
"A few days ago I saw Bridget, who came out with the First Michigan Cavalry, and has been with the regiment ever since. She had just come in with the body of a captain who was killed in a cavalry skirmish. She had the body lashed to her horse, and carried him fifteen miles, where she procured a coffin, and sent him home. She says this is the hardest battle they have had, and the ground was covered with the wounded. She had not slept for 48 hours, having worked incessantly with the wounded. She is brave, heroic, and a perfect enthusiast in her work..."

A stirring visual image of Bridget is presented in My Story of the War, showing her carrying the American flag, and leading the First Michigan Cavalry into an engagement.



A WOMAN IN BATTLE.—MICHIGAN

When I saw this picture of Michigan Bridget in an old book, my interest was stimulated. Then I read Women of the War which contained a letter by Rebecca Usher to her home in Maine. Part of that correspondence is quoted above. I was then curious to learn more about Bridget.

Much of the literature from the mid-19th century is written in an idealized and highly stylized form, conforming with standards of propriety of the day. Careful analysis of records however shows Michigan Bridget to have been a fascinating person, especially after removing the almost mythological language frequently used to describe her.

Who, then, was the real Michigan Bridget? Unfortunately there is not uniform agreement upon the spelling of her name. This is not unlikely as she herself probably was illiterate. Various books present her name as Deaver, Deavers, Divers, Devan, and Devens. At the time when she was clearly associated with the First Michigan Cavalry, she seemed consistently to go by the name Bridget Deavers, and represented herself as unmarried. In Stories of Hospital and Camp Mrs. C. E. McKay writes, "March 28th (1865) - Visited in company with Miss Bridget Deavers, two large camps of dismounted cavalrymen lying along the James River, a few miles from City Point. Bridget - or, as the men call her, Biddy - has probably seen more of hardship and danger than any other woman during the war. She has been with the cavalry all the time, going out with them on their cavalry raids - always ready to succor the wounded on the field - often getting men off who, but for her, would be

left to die, and, fearless of shell or bullet, among the last to leave."

In 1864, General Grant had banished all women from military operations, and Bridget subsequently worked with the United States Sanitary Commission. She spent the greater part of the last year of the war at the cavalry corp hospital at City Point, caring in various capacities for wounded soldiers. At City Point, she was a tentmate of Cornelia Hancock, a famous Quaker hospital worker for the Union cause.

To orient ourselves, it would be helpful to examine the time and location of eyewitness accounts describing Bridget. From this we can perhaps draw some conclusions, or at least make inferences about other aspects of her life. Bridget is first mentioned in Women of the War as being present at the battle of Fair Oaks on May 31st, 1862. Fair Oaks is located just east of Richmond, Virginia. This same book says that she was also found at the battle of Cedar Creek, Virginia which took place October 19th, 1864, in the Shenendoah Valley south of Winchester, Virginia. At Cedar Creek, "...She found herself at one time cut off and surrounded by the enemy, but managed, by an adroit movement, to escape capture." Her presence near City Point, Virginia, in March and April of 1865 has already been established. It is rewarding to see that these stirring feats of daring can be verified by the historical record. The Captain mentioned in the first paragraph was George C. Whitney of Hadley, in Lapeer County, who commanded Company B of the First Michigan Cavalry. He was severely wounded at the Battle of Five Forks near Petersburg, Virginia, on April 1st, 1965. His military record shows that he died April 4th, 1865, "on the road to the Cavalry Corp.

Hospital" at City Point, Virginia. His body was returned to Michigan, and he was buried at the Hadley Cemetery. Bridget's activity at Five Forks is also detailed in Women's Work in the Civil War. "In one of Sheridan's grand raids, during the latter days of the rebellion, she, as usual, rode with the troops night and day, wearing out several horses, until they dropped from exhaustion. In a severe cavalry engagement, in which her regiment took a prominent part, her colonel was wounded, and her captain killed. She accompanied the former to the rear, where she ministered to his needs, and when placed in the cars, bound for City Point Hospital, she remained with him, giving all the relief in her power, on that fatiguing journey, although herself almost exhausted, having been without sleep for four days and nights. After seeing her colonel safely and comfortably lodged in the hospital, she took one night's rest, and returned to the front. Finding that her captain's body had not been recovered, it being hazardous to make the attempt, she resolved to rescue it, as 'it never should be left on rebel soil'. So, with her orderly for sole companion, she rode fifteen miles to the scene of the late conflict, found the body she sought, strapped it upon her horse, rode back seven miles to an embalmers, where she wait whilst the body was enbalmed, then again strapping it on her horse, she rode several miles further to the cars in which, with her precious burden she proceeded to City Point, where she obtained a rough coffin and forwarded the whole to Michigan..."

The Colonel mentioned above was George R. Maxwell, of Grafton, Monroe County. Although this man had sustained several wounds earlier

in the war, the injury to his left leg received at Five Forks resulted in the amputation of the leg on April 17th, 1865. George returned to Monroe County and married Emma Belle Turner on September 16th, 1865. His new wife, however, died on January 17th, 1866. Subsequently, George moved to Salt Lake City, Utah Territory, and there married Mary Ann Sprague, July 21st, 1872. George died in Salt Lake City on July 2nd, 1889, reportedly of the late effects of his many war wounds. As the First Michigan Cavalry was stationed at Camp Douglas (3 miles east of Salt Lake City) immediately after the Civil War, certain possibilities are suggested that will be explored later.

It is now time to return to the question of Bridget's exact relationship to the First Michigan Cavalry, and to the State of Michigan. Although several sources state that her husband served as a private soldier in that regiment, no man named Deavers, or any variant spelling, appears on the rolls of that regiment (nor on the rolls of the Fifth, Sixth or Seventh Michigan Cavalry, other regiments of the Michigan Cavalry Brigade). An excerpt from Women of the War definitely suggests that in 1862, Bridget represented herself as married. "The battle of Fair Oaks commenced by a vigorous charge of an overwhelming rebel force upon a single division of McClellan's army, which had advanced across the Chickahominy. As Casey's division, thus attacked, gave way, there was danger that the panic might spread and infect the troops that were hastening to the support. Among these was the Seventh Massachusetts, that, having advanced to within range of the rebel artillery, had just received the order 'forward', that would in a few

moments plunge them into the heat of the contest. They obeyed the command but slowly, for the enemy's fire was growing every moment more terrific. Just then 'Irish Biddy' came along, supporting her husband, who had a ball through his leg. Swinging her soldier's cap over her head she shouted, 'Arrah! Go in boys, and bate the bloody spalpeens, and revinge me husband, and God be wid ye.'"

"The effect was instantaneous and decisive. The regiment gave three cheers for 'Irish Biddy' and three for the Seventh. Then joining the Tenth Massachusetts, and other troops, they made a gallant and successful charge on the enemy's center."

Since the First Michigan Cavalry was in the Shenendoah Valley on May 31st, 1862, and thus, far from the battle of Fair Oaks, Bridget's association must have been with some other organization on that date. Using a process of elimination, it is possible to determine all the regiments engaged in that battle, and which regiments were in position in advance of the Seventh Massachusetts Infantry. One can then select all names on those rosters which conform to the pattern of Deavers, Divers, Devens, etc. Of these names, Private George Devins was found in the 104th Pennsylvania Infantry. Official accounts of the battle of Fair Oaks show that, in fact, this regiment was driven back through the lines of the Seventh Massachusetts. More significantly, George Devins died of wounds received on that date at the battle of Fair Oaks. This suggests that Bridget was then presenting herself as the wife of George Devins. This is also consistent with her being called Bridget Devens or Devan, in various other records. George Devins clearly was not married

to Bridget, however, as he had a wife, Elizabeth, and several children, in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. It is tempting to speculate that similarities in the last names of Bridget and George Devins may have lead to their meeting, possibly while the 104th Pennsylvania Infantry trained in Pennsylvania, before leaving for Washington, D.C. on November 6, 1861, or while the regiment was quartered in Washington, D.C., until March, 1862.

But where did Bridget come from originally? Stories of Hospital and Camp said that in 1865 "She is an Irish woman, has been in the country sixteen years, and is now 26 years of age." This would place her date of birth about 1839 and the year of immigration as 1849. An exhaustive review of relevant immigration indexes reveals that a Biddy Diver arrived in Philadelphia on July 14th, 1849, from Londonderry, Ireland aboard the ship Afton. She was described as eleven years old, and without other obvious family members. The surname Diver is found almost exclusively in County Donnegal, Ireland, which borders on Londonderry. It seems likely that Bridget was one of the large number of Irish who came to America as a result of the potato famine. It is also true that no definite evidence exists that Bridget ever actually resided in Michigan.

Perhaps the most interesting question, and one which remains unanswered, is what happened to Bridget after the war? Woman's Work in the Civil War, in 1867, said that "when the war ended, Bridget accompanied her regiment to Texas, from whence she returned with them to Michigan, but the attractions of army life were too strong to be

overcome, and she has since joined one of the regiments of the regular army stationed on the plains in the neighborhood of the Rocky Mountains." However, Michigan Women in the Civil War indicates that "Bridget went out to the western plains with her regiment after the war. She must have liked the life, for, after the First Michigan Cavalry was disbanded, she joined a regular army cavalry unit as a laundress and continued in the West."

It is probable that Bridget went to Washington, D.C. for the Grand Review of the troops which took place in late May, 1865. Following this victory parade, most volunteer regiments were sent home, except for cavalry, which still had a role to play on the frontiers of the United States. In June, 1865, General Custer took a number of cavalry regiments to Texas to restore order and make sure that Mexico did not make any intrusions during the unrest after the collapse of the Southern Confederacy. However no Michigan cavalry regiments were with Custer's troops in that operation. The First Michigan Cavalry, on the other hand, left in June for service in the Western territories, going by way of Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and finally arriving in the fall at Camp Douglas, Utah Territory. That regiment was mustered out at Camp Douglas in March, 1866, the men paid off, and most of them no doubt returned to Michigan. Bridget's prior association with the 104th Pennsylvania Infantry suggests that she was not necessarily bound exclusively to the First Michigan Cavalry, and therefore could have gone to Texas with other cavalry regiments. However it is tempting to speculate that she did go to the Salt Lake City area (Camp Douglas) with the First Michigan

Cavalry, and perhaps remained in that region after the regiment was mustered out. Whether Colonel Maxwell knew of her presence, or of other former comrades who remained in the area, and thus decided to move there, remains an open question.

The story of Bridget's life remains incomplete. Perhaps at some later time, further study will show exactly how she spent the time after the Civil War. If she indeed did spend this segment of her life on the frontier, perhaps that story will be as interesting as her escapades during the War.

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